Summary
Willem van Konijnenburg. The Leonardo of the Low Countries

During the interbellum the Hague artist Willem van Konijnenburg (1868-1943) was one of the standard-bearers of Dutch modern art. After the Second World War, he disappeared from sight. Why? Closely related to this question are such issues as the nature of his art and his role as an artist, and the way they have been portrayed. What was Van Konijnenburg's place in the Dutch art world, and was the position accorded him what he himself had hoped for? My research is intended to provide an answer to these questions.

I am proceeding on the assumption that Van Konijnenburg consciously shaped his role as an artist, and that to a large extent he himself determined the image of his work and his person which emerged. It was around 1895 that he came to the conclusion that his realistic landscapes, painted with a ready brush, would not get him very far. This prompted him to go in search of what we know today as a 'new market identity'. The changes which subsequently took place in his work encompass such a broad terrain, and go so deep, that it is difficult to see them as the consequences of a purely artistic development. Once Van Konijnenburg had found his 'unique selling point', he transformed both his art and his persona with iron discipline. By 1907, after he had found his spokesman in the press, in the person of the critic Plasschaert, he was increasingly portrayed as an artist who perpetuated and built upon the tradition of the masters of painting, specifically those of the Italian Renaissance. He was regularly compared to Leonardo da Vinci. His admirers saw him as he himself saw the artist: as a spiritual leader. The role of an artist was a calling, and the life of an artist one of asceticism and restraint. This was the image that he himself put about and, for the most part, this was the way he was seen. His contemporaries regarded him with admiration, and his work was considered innovative. In the early twentieth century, there were even people who saw in him an artist who was changing the face of modern art in Holland. Konijnenburg himself believed that this was the role reserved for him. But there proved to be a considerable difference between what was seen as innovative in the first half of the twentieth century and the art which later generations would regard as innovative.

In *The conditions of success. How the modern artist rises to fame* (1989), Alan Bowness says that once certain conditions have been met, success is assured. There are four successive circles of recognition accorded the artist: peer recognition, critical recognition from art critics, patronage by dealers and collectors, and finally public acclaim. The first condition for success is an exceptional talent: early in his artistic career the artist stands out, and his fellow artists acknowledge him as the primus inter pares. Art critics – the first people to write about him are usually members of the artist's own circle – provide the vocabulary which will henceforth be employed in reference to his work. Moreover, they themselves must contribute to the critical debate on the work of the artist. Judgements on works of art are neither absolute nor definitive: they are upheld by some kind of consensus. Having achieved that art-critical recognition, says Bowness, the artist will have the support of art dealers and collectors. Once the talent and accomplishments of the artist are acknowledged in these circles, recognition in the widest circle – that of the public at large – is assured.

This holds true in the case of Van Konijnenburg, to the extent that the talent was unmistakeably present and recognized quite early on. His fellow artists acknowledged him as primus inter pares, not only for his artistic accomplishments, but also for his flair and organizational gifts. His success was enhanced after 1907, thanks to the support of the art

critics, notably Albert Plasschaert and – for a shorter period and to a lesser degree – Arie van Veen, Bernard Canter and later Just Havelaar, Kasper Niehaus and Bram Hammacher. Thanks to Plasschaert, an art-critical consensus had been arrived at concerning the quality of Van Konijnenburg's work, expressed in stereotypical terms. After 1907 his paintings were displayed with some regularity by art dealers, and were also collected beyond the circle of family and friends, by people like the tea and quinine merchant Frits Kok (from 1928 on, the firm of Van Kooten Kok), who would ultimately invest a small fortune in Van Konijnenburg (179 works). But there were also collectors with museological ambitions, such as the paint manufacturer P.A. Regnault and Helene Kröller-Müller, the wife of business tycoon Anton Kröller. And although Van Konijnenburg would never attain the broad popularity of Jan Toorop, following his national breakthrough in 1917, he was generally acknowledged as an important modern artist.

The reputation of Van Konijnenburg was based largely on works dating from the period 1910-1921, including such masterpieces as his own selections for the issue of *Wendingen* (4 (1921) 1/2) devoted to his work: *Rotslandschap* (Rocky landscape)*, St. Joris met de draak* (St. George and the dragon)*, Vrouw met witte kat* (Woman with white cat)*, Overgave* (Submission)*, Vita summa in mortem transcendit, De afneming van het kruis*, (The descent from the cross), the dances, the anatomical studies, *Zacharia,* and the portraits of P.C. Boutens, Peter Spaan, Anton van Herzeele, Koosje van der Vegt and Albert Plasschaert. The quality of these works was indisputable. For foreign exhibitions he often submitted new versions of *Aarde, Lucht en Water* (Earth, air and water) and the pendants *Vrouw met witte kat* and *Vrouw met zwarte kat* (Woman with black cat). The later versions of *Vrouw met witte kat* and *Vrouw met zwarte kat* were purchased by foreign museums (cat. 184 and 185).

The work of Van Konijnenburg was part of the canon of Dutch modern art. In contemporary surveys he was ranked alongside Jan Toorop, Johan Thorn Prikker, Antoon Derkinderen, and Richard Roland Holst, all artists whose reputation was undisputed. Together with Toorop and the somewhat younger Jan Sluijters and Leo Gestel, Van Konijnenburg represented Dutch modern art at numerous official venues abroad. Since he himself regularly served on the selection committees of these exhibitions, he was in a position to ensure his own participation and to determine which of his works would be exhibited. During the interbellum, the image of modern art put forward by the Dutch museums was shaped mainly by the collections of private societies and private collectors. Together with the municipal collections, these private loans and legacies resulted in a pluriform image of largely Dutch modern art. The choice of artists reflected the national selection for international exhibitions of modern art, and often those invited to participate were the same collectors who had made their work available to the museums.

It is noteworthy how small the representation of totally abstract art was in the pre-war museum collections – both works owned outright and works on loan. Private collectors with museological ambitions also gave up when faced with abstraction. It is often noted that both Henk Bremmer and Helene Kröller-Müller terminated their financial support for Mondriaan in 1919, because the work he was doing no longer had any ties with the visible world. And another enthusiast, Sal Slijper, bought no abstract works from him after 1921. In the years before the Second World War, there was a commonly held view that all representations ought to be bound up with perceptible reality.

During the thirties some of Van Konijnenburg's best work was to be seen at exhibitions of the permanent collection of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague and Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. This was due in large measure to the interest displayed by Hendrik Enno van Gelder en Gerard Knuttel in The Hague, and Cornelis Baard and David Röell in Amsterdam. When Van Konijnenburg was commissioned to produce a monumental art

work for the hall of the new building in The Hague, *Eer het god'lijk licht in d'openbaringen van de kunst* (Honour the divine light in the revelations of art), this provided confirmation of the central role which Van Gelder and Knuttel accorded him, not only within the museum, but also in the history of Dutch modern art, the development of which was chronicled in the collection.

Change in the canon

After his death in 1943, Van Konijnenburg disappeared from the centre of the Dutch art world. In an effort to establish why this happened, it may be useful to look at the formation of the canon in the visual arts. This canon consists of a group of works which at a certain point in time came to be regarded as the pinnacle of Western art. It is a relative judgement and one based on a changing series of inclusions and exclusions with respect to artists and art works. The selection takes place on the basis of criteria which flow from the prevailing artistic, intellectual and social standards and values. These are subject to change, which means that artists and art works may also be dropped from or readmitted to the canon. Canons are constructed by such entities as art academies, museums, art criticism and art history. They serve as benchmarks for academic teaching and museum policy, and determine the art-historical and historiographical frame of reference. At the same time, the above entities criticize the established canons, and construct new ones, which in their turn form the guidelines for the academic, museological, critical and historiographical selection criteria. The reversal in the appreciation of the work of Van Konijnenburg can be explained by the breakthrough of modernism after the Second World War, both in art history and in museum policy. From a modernist perspective, he was a marginal figure.

The avalanche in the canonical image of modern art which was the result of this development effectively banished Van Konijnenburg from museum presentation. Where in the past the position and thus the appreciation of Dutch modern art was largely a national affair – in the sense that Dutch artists were assessed in relation to other Dutch artists – after the war that assessment tended to take place within an international framework. The spotlight was now directed at Dutch artists who had featured in the history of international modern art, or could be seen as associated with that history. Vincent van Gogh had for some time been recognized as the forefather of expressionism. The artists of De Stijl, headed by Mondriaan, represented abstraction. There was one new developmental model of modern art, and it was international. Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, had presented the development of modern art in a schema on the occasion of the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* in 1936. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne and Seurat, and indirectly Redon and Rousseau, gave rise to movements which ultimately resulted in the two main branches of contemporary modern art: 'non-geometrical abstract art' and 'geometrical abstract art'. The developmental model laid down by Barr in *Chart of Modern Art* dominated the view of the history of modern art for decades, acquiring such authority that it largely determined the canon. In Holland the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague elaborated on the developmental model sketched by Barr in their exhibition and acquisition policies. Although each museum had its own local variations, depending on factors such as the financial resources available, the directors of these museums all saw the development of modern art as a movement of on the one hand expressionism, and on the other hand cubism/constructivism – with both headed in the direction of abstraction. The international modernist canon guided policy in Dutch modern art museums, notably those mentioned above. Work by dead Dutch artists which could not in some way be connected with the international development of modern art was rarely collected or exhibited. The position that Van Konijnenburg held before and after the Second World War in the Gemeentemuseum in

The Hague is illustrative of the turning-point in the evaluation of his work. In 1920 it was the first museum in Holland to purchase work by him and today, thanks to bequests and legacies, it has the largest collection of Van Konijnenburg's work: some 30 paintings and around 50 worked-up drawings, not counting sketches and designs for monumental commissions. At the opening of the new building reserved for the Hague collections in 1935, Van Konijnenburg was a prominent guest. After 1945, however, his work gradually disappeared from the permanent collection. The last traces of Van Konijnenburg's presence were erased in 1969, when *Eer het god'lijk licht* was temporarily replaced by a kinetic object by Gerhard von Graevenitz.

A glance at the art-historical literature of the post-war period evokes a similar picture. No one has ever felt called upon to secure Van Konijnenburg's place in the history of modern art. The new surveys of art history in the Netherlands contain almost no reference to him. In the historiography of Dutch modern art he is linked to symbolism, a movement which in Holland reached its highpoint in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and traces of which were seen into the twentieth century. I do not regard this classification as self-evident.

Bettina Polak confined her 1953 dissertation *Het symbolisme in de Nederlandse schilderkunst 1890-1900* (Symbolism in Dutch Painting 1890-1900) to the work of four artists: Derkinderen, Toorop, Roland Holst and Thorn Prikker. She focused on the period 1890-1900, with special emphasis on the first half of the nineties (when Van Konijnenburg was painting his realistic landscapes). Van Konijnenburg did not meet the criteria which Polak had set for symbolism. 'Symbolism' and 'symbolist' have traditionally proved difficult terms to handle, given that they do not refer exclusively to the style, nor exclusively to the content of the art works in question. Certain – largely literary – motifs which appear in the work of artists generally regarded as symbolists can also be found in artists of the romantic movement. In Polak's view, woman – whether *femme fatale* or innocent – was the major symbolist theme. She is represented as Salomé, Cleopatra, Medusa and the sphinx, and her attributes include the snake, symbol of sinful sensuality, as well as the chimera, the harpy and the vulture. The bride is depicted as the innocent woman, and her main attributes are lily, lotus, rose, sunflower, passion flower, convolvulus, swan, harp, lyre, and violin. The masculine counterparts of the femme fatale are Pan and the centaur. Other symbolist themes include time (past, present and future), fate, and death. The inner world is reflected in states of the soul such as yearning and melancholy. The fact that Polak distinguishes not only this 'subjective' symbolism, but also an 'objective' symbolism detracts from the usefulness of the concept. Objective symbolism does not portray the inner emotional life in a non-traditional form, but rather – proceeding from a general philosophy of life – aims at creating art in the service of society. Sylistically, objective symbolism is characterized by the stylized line and compositions based on geometry.

In subjective symbolism, line and colour express the sensual significance of the motif, but they also acquire a more independent function which, as Polak notes, represents the innovative significance of this work. In her view, the stylization of the line and the deformation are characteristic of symbolist art. As noted in the introduction, in 1978 the criterium of the independent use of the visual resources was examined by a group of art history students in Utrecht. Under the guidance of Carel Blotkamp and Evert van Uitert, they traced the course of symbolism – in the work of Konijnenburg and others – up to 1930. Here, too, a distinction was made between symbolism in content and symbolism in form, whereby an innovative value was attributed to the latter. The employment of line and colour as a means of expression led to abstraction in the work of a number of artists. The themes favoured by symbolists include inspired reality, the evocative effect of music (sounds are

portrayed in colour and line), woman as *femme fatale* and *femme fragile*, the soul which soars over mere matter, states of the soul, the role of the artist, and social and intellectual movements. The conclusion was that it is not the use of certain symbols and the rendering of certain themes which distinguished symbolism from romanticism, but rather the evocative function of the visual resources. On the basis of the autonomous use of the visual resources, the period was extended from around 1880 to 1930, from Matthijs Maris and Van Gogh to Van Doesburg's manifesto of concrete painting. The symbolist roots in the work of such varied artists as Simon Moulijn, Frans Stamkart, Janus de Winter and Janus van Zeggen, Bart van der Leck and Piet Mondriaan, and Gustaaf van de Wall Perné, were unearthed. The work and artistic views of Van Konijnenburg were likewise traced back to symbolism. This set the trend for the years to come.

Change of perspective

Should Van Konijnenburg then be associated with symbolism, and if so, on the basis of which characteristics? Or do his art and his concept of art provide sufficient grounds to place a different stamp on his work. I have strived to demonstrate the plausibility of the latter view. Various aspects of Van Konijnenburg's work make it understandable that he has been seen by some as a symbolist. However, there is far more reason – as I have attempted to make clear in Chapter 2, which deals with the rules of art – to regard him as a classicist.

Van Konijnenburg regarded the unity of aesthetics and ethics as the very core of his art and his role as an artist. He drew up a collection of rules for the expression of absolute beauty, and in his art he demonstrated the application of those rules. He cast his themes in the fixed form of a mathematical grid, and stylized his motifs according to basic geometrical patterns. In this sense, he sided with the artistic innovators who had turned their backs on the arbitrariness of impressionism and expressionism, but he did so for other reasons than the cubists and the constructivists. Van Konijnenburg used basic mathematical shapes to create 'unity in diversity': ideal beauty based on proportional relationships. He deliberately allied himself with the great artists of the Renaissance, who often made use of proportional relationships experienced as harmonious. This was precisely what he was striving for: the realization of harmony. His contemporaries, however, used mathematics for other purposes: to visualize the order of the cosmos by means of symbols (as certain theosophical artists did) or, by contrast, to rationalize the form language, as Van Doesburg strived to do with his concept of concrete painting. In the work of Van Konijnenburg, line and colour are not independent means of expression. In the choice of his motifs, he harks back to the classical hierarchy of genres, yet another aspect of classicism. As regards the content of the motifs, there is a certain overlap with the symbolist repertoire – for example, when the material world is transcended and one enters the world of the spirit in *Centaur* and in *Aarde, Lucht en Water*, as well as in such states of the soul as meditation and contemplation. But more often he chose themes and motifs rooted in an older visual tradition: horsemen, shepherds, fishermen, the battle between good and evil, and scenes from the Passion of Christ. From 1916 on, Van Konijnenburg devoted more time to drawing. He preferred line to colour. Like the symbolists, he sought a path leading away from the malaise of impressionism and towards idealism. But in his case this led to an artistic credo and works of art which bore the stamp of classicism. In his orientation, however, he was freer than the classicists who preceded him, whose guidelines were Greek sculpture from the classical period and/or the paintings of Raphael. He gave shape to a modern classicism.

In *Modern – Klassisch* (1987), Evert van Uitert maintained that classicistic tendencies were an inherent part of the modernism of fauvists and cubists. He believed that in France that classicism was reinforced by the conditions during the First World War. Its characteristics were defined in 1990 by Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy in the

introduction to their *On classic ground. Picasso, Léger, de Chirico and the new classicism 1910-1930*. According to the authors, the major features of this modern classicism are the choice of classical subjects and a preference for the traditional genres of figure study, nude, landscape and still life. In a stylistic sense, the sculpture of classical antiquity and the art of the Italian Renaissance do form a point of orientation, but no more than that, and not the only one. The main thing that distinguished modern classicism from that of academic arrière-gardists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Alexandre Cabanel en William-Adolphe Bouguereau was the fact that the avant-garde classicists were not trying to imitate their predecessors. Rather they were striving to distil from their work its essential principles, and to use them as a source of innovation in their own art. This makes the way free for examples other than those from the Athens of Pericles, the Rome of Augustus, and the Italy of Raphael: for example, archaic Greek art, the art of the Etruscans, and the more primitive Italian art dating from the fourteenth and early fifteenth century, by Giotto, Paolo Uccello, and Piero della Francesca. More than their academic predecessors, the modern classicists make use of examples not in order to copy them, but rather to distil from them the principles of their art, and to place them within a new framework. In other words, *aemulatio* rather than *imitatio*. Van Konijnenburg meets the criteria of Cowling and Mundy, mainly in the use of his examples and the style which he employs, less so in his choice of motifs. His reasons for focusing on the past as a trait d'union between past and future likewise comply with their image of the new classicism.

The assessment of Van Konijnenburg appears to depend on the perspective from which he is viewed. If one looks at him from a symbolist perspective, he can only be seen as one of the many followers. But when he is viewed from a classicistic perspective – and in my view there is more reason to see him as a classicist than as a symbolist – then he is one of the precursors of the *retour à l'ordre* which took place during and after the First World War. However, regardless of the standpoint from which he is seen, it is abundantly clear that, given his striving to express in his work general, common values, his idealistic view of geometry as the only pure basis for a composition, his decision to shape his motifs according to a Renaissance ideal of beauty, and his desire to vie with the grand masters of European painting, he has made his own contribution to modern art in Holland.

My purpose in embarking on this study was not to initiate a discussion designed to ensure that Van Konijnenburg is again accorded a place in the canon. What I have attempted to highlight is the historic importance of Van Konijnenburg's work and person. This is not the first time that Dutch museums of modern art have been accused of lacking a sense of history. The value of an artist from the past is often assessed on the basis of his significance for present-day art, sometimes referred to as the 'reverse perspective'. Because Van Konijnenburg lacked topicality, i.e., he did not fit the current model for the development of modern art, his entire work was relegated to oblivion. This is not a fair judgement. If only because of his prominent role in the history of Dutch art during the first half of the twentieth century, Van Konijnenburg is deserving of a permanent place in the presentation of modern art in Dutch museums, and in the history of that art. But even disregarding his historic significance, the quality of much of his work is undisputed. Van Konijnenburg's battling monsters, dances, *De drie levens-essenties* (The three essences of life), *Verbi divini inspiratio, Witte ruiters, Donkere ruiters* (White horsemen, dark horsemen), and *Zacharia* are all works that deserve to be seen.

Translation by Barbara Fasting